

The Clipper Visits Tom Dublinski

By NANCY McCAFFERTY



Tom Dublinski

The gladiator returns to the arena. The echo of the standing, cheering crowd sparks a flashback to the time when those accolades were for him. He lives it again as vividly as if the now were then, the day when he was warrior king.

There was humor, too. At Ypsilanti, Mich., the Lion's training camp, things might get tense so end Bill Swiacki and backup quarterback Jim Hardy dressed up as Cochise and Logan to give player reports as to how it was going. "Hardy wore feathers, war paint, the whole thing," said Dublinski. "They put on skits about the lousy food, kidded the coaches about their ideas and the players' about their playing. They were really funny." Dublinski tells a story on himself, too. He was the quarterback in a league championship game at Chicago and the closer the Lions got to the opponents' end zone the more excited Dublinski became. "We were in the huddle and I started talking fast, too fast. We began to line up in formation when one of the players came back to ask what I had said and we were called for delay of game. The coach called Doak Walker out to find out what had happened. Coach Parker asked if I had been telling jokes in the huddle and Walker said, 'No, but I think he's calling the plays in Polish.' Next year at training camp I was the subject of a lot of Cochise-Logan skits."

However, training camp was essentially a serious business. Of the 45 rookies trying to make the team, 39 would be cut. Of interest might be that along with Dublinski, Yale Lary, Byron Bailly, and Hank Lauricella, a 235-lb. kick-off/field goal specialist named George "Pat" Summerall were rookies in 1952.

In the early '50's TV's impact was not particularly relevant as far as revenue and publicity for football were concerned. The gate was the main factor. The old All American League had crumbled and there was only the NFL composed of National and American Conferences. Chicago had its Bears as well as its Cardinals. Dallas had the Texans, but no Cowboys. The 49ers, Rams, Lions, Packers, Texans, and Bears made up the National Conference. The Browns, Cardinals, N.Y. Giants, Eagles, Steelers, and Redskins were the American Conference. Each team played 12 regular season games and 2 played a 13th, the championship game. The season lasted 3-4 months. Players negotiated their own contracts.

Changes have come. Dublinski said any sport -- any successful sport -- will grow and change. There is a constant ebb and flow of ideas. The old is discarded or made new again. Specifically, the manner of training is different. Today more emphasis is put on strength. Weight lifting is used regularly. There has been an enormous shift in attitude about diet. Steaks, red meat, and tightly controlled water intake were emphasized in the '50's. Now carbohydrates and Gatorade are king. There have been constant improvements in equipment. Protection from injury and support of vulnerable body points by light weight

He foresees the day when all the stadiums in the north and mid-west will have domes to neutralize the weather factor.

The fans, often called the 12th man, always give the home team an advantage. "I think they're as much a part of the team as we are and they think so, too." In Detroit's old Tiger Stadium, the crowds supported us so well they sounded like our mascot sometimes. They really knew their football. They'd cheer you if you did a good job but lost and they'd boo you if you won but did a poor job. They let you know."

Retirement does not come easily for those who have known the rarified atmosphere of professional sports. "No player is ever mentally prepared no matter how much they think about it," he said. "You always think of playing forever. It took years before I could say I couldn't go out and play the game every Sunday. It's a question of how many years you want to take the punishment." The dreams of child do not easily relinquish their hold on the man.

This year's Superbowl was the best thing that could have happened for pro football, he said. "The teams with the best records were there. With the play-off system we have now, it doesn't always work out that way." Of the 2 quarterbacks, he said the 49er's Montana is "very good, broke into stardom earlier than most, and was at the right place at the right time with the right coach." The Bengal's Anderson is "really good, more mature, plays consistently good football." Consistency is the tell-tale sign of greatness. A team like Cincinnati and San Francisco, Philadelphia and Miami. But he says never to discount Dallas, a fine organization headed by Tom Landry who has a natural ability to handle people. Other coaches he considers the best are Don Shula, Bud Grant, and Chuck Knoll, all of whom have been consistently successful over a period of time.

The week of parties in Detroit culminated in the Friday night NFL gala sponsored by Commissioner Pete Roselle, which the Dublinskis attended. Saturday night the 1952 Detroit Lions held their reunion at the Hyatt Regency ballroom. The city of Detroit put its best foot forward, scheduled celebrations and events in which the local populus and the out-of-towners could participate. It went on all week to the delight of those who were there.

Then Sunday... THE GAME... "There is electricity all through your body," said Dublinski of a championship. "The game is all emotion. Your body is trained but the emotions give an extra boost. People sitting on the bench don't have to get up when they come into the game...they're already up. Words can't explain how it feels. You have to be part of it."

He looks at the World Championship ring on his finger. "I never believed in wearing jewelry but

Tom Dublinski of Bolas Rd. traveled to Detroit's Silverdome last month to see Superbowl XVI and also to celebrate a 30-year reunion with the 1952 World Champion Lions, a team on which he played quarterback behind Bobby Layne.

Dublinski says it isn't possible to describe what it feels like to be part of a team which wins a championship. It is something that can be fully understood only by those who share the experience. The Lions went on to win the championship again in 1953, both years beating hated arch-rival, the Cleveland Browns, and in 1954 wrested the divisional title from the Browns. Detroit's head coach, Buddy Parker, started beating the drum well in advance of the regular season game with Cleveland. "Everything, every other game was getting ready for Cleveland," said Dublinski.

Cleveland had Marion Motley, then "the greatest fullback, who moved like a Sherman tank." Detroit had end Jim Doran, named most valuable player by his teammates in 1952 and dubbed the "Graham Cracker" by newsmen because of his outstanding rushing tactics against famed Cleveland quarterback, Otto Graham. There are many names from the past, names which, before there was a Superbowl, an NFC or an AFC, stand out as the classics of football. Detroit quarterback, Bobby Layne, who, as a tribute to his consistent excellence was selected to flip the coin at this year's Superbowl, is one of them. "Bobby Layne was the Errol Flynn of football," said Dublinski. "He was a man as colorful off the field as on. He was a take-charge guy who wanted and had full authority on the field. He would bowl or remove a player from the game who wasn't doing his job. He wouldn't take excuses. Many people don't realize how difficult a quarterback's job is. He has to see and direct the entire picture. Sometimes you sacrifice a play to set up another one. It's like chess. He has to weigh the advice of his players, know when to take it and when a player says something just for a chance at personal glory on the next play. Layne was very good at that." In 1952 Layne's total offensive mark shows 2,410 yards gained of the Lion's total of 3,988 or 60.6% of the team's offensive output.

Dublinski said that in a group composed of 2 Heisman and Maxwell Trophy winners, innumerable All-Stars, All-Americans, All-Pros, and several Hall of Famers, the key to their success was their playing as a team. Dublinski himself received honorable mention as an All American, was "All Conference" in the Skyline Conference, and was 4th in the nation in passing in 1951 at the University of Utah. He even made the bubble gum cards!

Once in the pros, he found an esprit de corps among the Lions. "It was a closeness where we could laugh at ourselves, have fun with the elements, and have a good relationship with the coaching staff. There was a feeling for everyone. Even the wives felt close," he said.

The average playing time for a pro is 3.8 years. It is almost unheard of for a man to play 10-12 years (as Dublinski did here and in Canada). But perhaps the greatest differences are that football has become a year-round job and the players can be protected legally in contract negotiations. "Players today should never, never get out of shape," said Dublinski. "The season is longer; they play more games. It isn't just the physical conditioning that's so important. It's the mental; he has to start thinking about the next season as soon as this one's over." Dublinski says that football in his era was a break from the job you had the rest of the year. It was a business, but it was also a childhood dream come true. "It was the most wonderful thing to be able to play a boy's sport as a man." Now it's not that way.

Contracts, or the control a player can have over his contract is the second great difference. Football is the third highest on the salary scale of professional sports. Dublinski believes that for a contact sport, today's players are being paid fairly. "It's their flesh on the line." He thinks players, then the coaches, followed by the owners and stockholders, should be the order of consideration when the profits are being divided. The teams of the '50's and the way players were handled regarding finances paved the way for the player-businessman of today. Lawyers are now present during negotiations to protect the player, which was not permitted in Dublinski's day. But the organization's lawyer was always there. It seemed inevitable that there would be a reaction in the other direction. "Football, or any contact sport is a short-lived thing anyway," said Dublinski. "Injuries eventually catch up with you. When we were at the reunion last month, everybody there had had knee or hip surgery -- everybody was limping." There was only one league, only 12 teams when Dublinski played. The best players were selected and were paid pretty much what the owner was willing to pay. The law of supply and demand. There just wasn't any other place for a player to go if he objected to his salary and was still able to play the game professionally.

Dublinski played for the Lions until 1954. He then went to the Canadian Football League with the Toronto Argonauts. In 1958 he returned to the U.S. to join the N.Y. Giants, who at that time had as defensive coach Tom Landry and offensive coach Vince Lombardi. He went to the Hamilton Tiger Cats again in Canada in 1959 and ended his career in 1962 with the Denver Broncos. In Canada his passing ability earned him the nickname of the "Rifle."

He has played in cold weather country and, recalling the picture of the steam rising off the Ohio River during this year's AFC championship game, Dublinski says the team which adjusts most quickly has an advantage. "Players have to prepare mentally and adjust their game plan accordingly," he said, "but playing in the heat is just as bad as playing in the cold."

...it's pride and achievement. Some people may say it doesn't mean much but inside where the heart is, it does." The ring, shaped at the top like a football with 1952 World Champions embossed on it, lion heads on either side, and Detroit Lions underneath them, a diamond in the center of the football. Considering the lifetime of moving, physical punishment, focusing the abundance of the one's attention and devotion on one thing, was it worth it? "It's worth it. It's one of the few times in your life you can look back on with fond memories, laughter, and know those childhood dreams came true."